

Gurnet lighthouse won't be moved, for now

Coast wants to consider alternatives

By Charles Mathewson
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PLYMOUTH — The Coast Guard will work with residents of the Gurnet on alternatives to moving the lighthouse.

"We wish to withdraw our application at this time," Claudio Polselli, a Coast Guard engineer, told a surprised conservation commission Monday night.

"We will be reapplying at a future date, after we get consensus with the residents," added Coast Guard commander Geoff Abbott. "I'd just like to say we appreciated the opportunity to meet with the residents earlier today."

The Coast Guard had asked the Plymouth conservation commission to review plans to move Plymouth Light 150 feet away from an eroding bluff.

Instead of moving the lighthouse back, Gurnet residents want the Coast Guard to save the eroding bluff that it shares with a Revolutionary War fort.

As a federal agency, the Coast Guard needs no local approval of its plan but it still must comply with the state wetlands protection act, because the work will take place within 100 feet of a body of water. So it took the plans before the local conservation commission, which normally decides if projects comply with wetlands law.

After Gurnet residents objected to the plan, the conservation commission delayed action two weeks ago until Monday night's meeting. More than a dozen residents of the peninsula waited in the hallway at town hall for the hearing. When Coast Guard representatives did not appear for the 8:30

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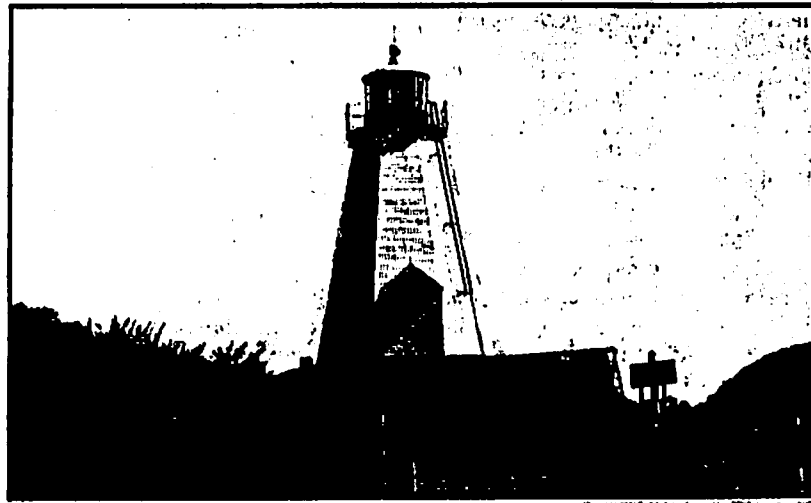
p.m. appointment, commission chairman Michael Mason called a recess.

Polselli and Abbott arrived late to make their brief announcement because they spent the evening at the lighthouse speaking with the rest of the residents of the Gurnet.

"It was a very impromptu meeting," Gurnet resident Inga Hanks told the group in the hallway after the meeting. "We tried to get a hold of as many people as possible to sit with the Coast Guard and see where we can go with this plan. We don't want an adversarial relationship with our neighbor, who's the biggest land owner out there. We want to work it out."

"We really want to make it a team effort," Abbott said. "There are some special situations on the Gurnet we have to work out together. We are going to have to move the lighthouse to protect it."

Plymouth Light is the oldest wooden lighthouse in the country. It's stood on the bluff at the Gurnet for nearly 175 years. Since the



The lighthouse on the Gurnet is a lot closer to the water than it used to be.

Blizzard of '78 stripped vegetation from the face of the cliff, its edge has approached the structure. The engineers calculate they need 40 feet around the lighthouse to safely move it. It now stands 45 feet from the edge. Part of the earthen Revolutionary War fort has already dropped into the ocean.

Residents assured Abbott that if the Coast Guard builds a seawall along the 1,000 feet of cliff it owns and plants new vegetation on the cliff face, the lighthouse would be safe for another 175 years where it stands. Abbott said the Coast Guard is responsible only for the light. The Coast Guard will have to move it out of harm's way, he said, but would not have to move it the full 100 feet and will help residents in their effort to stop the erosion.

"We can help find alternatives to the erosion problem," he said. "We probably don't have the resources ourselves. The Army Corps of Engineers has estimated

it will cost \$8 million to \$10 million to do that work. We just don't have that kind of money now and it takes us five years to get an appropriation through Congress. We don't have the time, but there may be alternative funding sources available to you."

Residents say they've protected portions of the cliff for much less money. They also say protecting only a portion of the cliff is a waste of money. The Coast Guard owns the longest portion.

"You have to do the whole cliff or else it will just cut in somewhere else," said resident Bill McGraw. "Three of us got together and built a wall five years ago. Our portion cost \$30,000 for 100 feet. Over on the other side the Brenners spent \$90,000 for a wall 240 feet long."

Abbott said he appreciated the efforts of the residents and pledged to continue to work with them to develop a cost-effective, comprehensive plan to save both the light and the cliff.

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